

# HP's WORKSHOP

## Maggie 3.7 Speaker System

Part Two

Harry Pearson

*Part One was published in the last issue (212), and I should have labeled it a sneak preview since the Maggies had arrived in Sea Cliff just after their showing in Las Vegas, and just as my deadline was about to fall due. And so most of my listening was done with CDs, including several Golden Ear winners in Editor's Choice. However, then, after some quite quick listens to analog material, I knew the speaker was capable of much, much more. And so, Part Two.*

**T**he Maggie 3.7s are the best speaker system that Magnepan has produced in years, and of such excellence that they foreshadow future and more impressive designs from the company. Their arrival shows that the company, seemingly having lost its way for almost a decade, has found again its old fire and sense of purpose.

Yes, I am suggesting there is a larger and more revelatory design in its future, and, aside from some not-so-subtle hints, no one at the company will out-and-out confirm this speculation. For as good as the 3.7s are, and they are breathtakingly so, there is more to be done.

For one thing, the new Maggies do not plumb the very most depths of the bottom octave, though they are so cannily balanced you won't ordinarily miss the shuddering response of organ pedal points or massive bass drum whacks (or synthesizer pulses). The 3.7s go down, with careful setup, just maybe, to circa 40Hz, with a gentle roll-off that allows some of the harmonics of the basement frequencies to be audible further up.

From the midbass (which I define as 40 to 80Hz) upward, the response is seamless, continuous, and extended into what some would call the heavenly region.

You won't hear a trace of any crossovers from the true ribbon tweeter at the top (on which Magnepan holds a patent) to its new quasi-ribbon midrange and quasi-ribbon low-frequency drivers. And, at the outset, you won't be listening for such arcanities, so convincing is the coherency and continuousness of the system.

Indeed, with the best playback material, especially analog, there is an "aliveness," even a sort of electricity in the presentation of individual images upon the soundstage that can and does create an illusion of the real thing I've not heard from any Magnepan speaker before, or, for that matter, almost any speaker system. So convincing is the 3.7 in its almost "living presence" that you won't miss those last few bottom-end frequencies.

The other things you'll note immediately is the size of the soundfield that these (relatively) modest-sized speakers project. The ambient space itself is huge (as in life) and envelops the distance behind the speakers (dipoles), but, unlike earlier Maggies, the images within that field are anything but "huge." Indeed, they are proportionate to the way you would hear them in concert (or in relation to the way the recording itself has been miked). Stir in, metaphorically speaking, the real-world attack and decay these ribbons and quasi-ribbons delineate, i.e., the "presence," and the distance between you and a sense of the real thing is reduced in a





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way it simply isn't with other reproducers. It has, in the words of a talented listener who sat in for a long session with me, "not only amazing dynamic abilities, but offers a coherence in timing, the arrival of all the frequencies in the proper relative time frame." The gradations and shading of dynamics, from the micro to the macro, is one of the speaker's greatest achievements, and this, I believe, is a function of the exceptional rendering of transients, both in attack and decay.

Now, obviously, you aren't going to get such results if you do not use the best recordings and the associated equipment capable of sustaining dynamics on transients and the power to cleanly enforce and back up those transients. In the first sessions with the 3.7s, I used a CD player that, unbeknownst to me at first blush, compressed dynamics, but did other things admirably, including an almost spooky rendering of the depth and dimensional aspects within the ambient space (*vide*, the Regent recording—available through Albany Records—of Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, recorded in the Worcester Cathedral). It took the insertion of the EMM Labs XD player to restore the dynamics to realistic proportions. However, at the cost of the dimensionality and ambient retrieval I made note of in the first part of this essay. Even with the enhanced CD dynamics, analog recordings had even more dynamic life and "presence (thanks, I believe, to the Veloce battery-operated line and phonostages, whose real *forte*—forgive the intended pun—is an extended range of dynamic capability). Which brings me around to an obvious point: Anything your associated equipment does wrong or inadequately you are going to hear through these Maggies, and so, in these sessions, clarity and neutrality of character and purity of tone were the first things I aimed to achieve. I don't think I have yet succeeded in realizing the 3.7s' capabilities in this regard. For example, at the very last moment before this particular deadline, the Nordost Tyr interconnects gave way to a Furutech system, which I haven't had time to evaluate, but which is at least as good as the Nordost, and maybe even better.

You will not realize the full potential of the system if you don't have the Maggies set up in a way that helps them lock into the acoustics of your listening room. I say start with what I called the Pearson Rule of Thirds, i.e., both speakers a third of the way into the listening room (itself preferably shoebox-shaped) and the combination a third of the way from the side walls (equidistant). I also found, despite some thoughts otherwise from Magnepan's Wendell Diller, that the speakers imaged best and not in a locked-in optimal seating for one (call it the electrostatic beaming effect) with the ribbon tweeters near the room's midpoint, not adjacent to the outside walls. With the ribbons next to the walls, there is

a loss of the speaker's superb focus and instrument placement, even the layering effect.

Some experimentation with the distance from the room's rear walls is a necessity for achieving the flat 40Hz bass I know is possible, and, you'll have to give the 3.7s a fairly long break-in to achieve the full mid and lower bass of which it is capable. (Me? I used some organ recordings from the aforementioned Regent label and put the system into repeat play. It worked.) Don't worry about the speakers' ability to handle power. Magnepan drove them quite successfully with Bryston's 1000-watt monoblocks (the 28Bs—next on my agenda for new sessions). And I have had no trouble with the 300-watts-per-channel output of the McIntosh 2301s.

What has to be said is that the 3.7s, per pair, go for \$5495, or \$2747 each, in my opinion, almost being given away. That too, along with their superb build, is in the Magnepan tradition. Magnepan is nothing if not fair to its customers. Don't think it isn't high end because the price isn't. The opposite: You could say this is putting music into the hands of the people.

During the extended listening in Round Two, I dug out first the Cat Stevens album *Tea for the Tillerman*, and specifically focused on "Hard-Headed Woman" and "Wild World." It so happened that the pre-Islamic Stevens, a Greek, used to play these cuts, decades ago, on earlier Maggies installed at Mike Kay's Lyric Hi-Fi in New York, and so these are part and parcel of the elite among my Super Discs. I was specifically listening to hear if the midbass guitar notes were as superlatively rendered on the 3.7s as they had been on the old Tympani speakers, one of Magnepan's design goals with the new speaker. The answer is no, the 3.7s don't have that quality of "authority" the Tympani's did, but Stevens did sound as if he were in the listening room with me; alive, dramatically alive was the vocal rendering. It was a shock to me since I thought I knew all there was to know about this recording's quality. I am never quite sure how to describe an experience that changes your perception of what can be done in the reproduction of recorded sound ("astonished," "blown away," "electrified," "awe-stricken?"), but my reactions may have been all these. And this is a reference record (still in admirably clean shape), an original on the Island label (not a reference in its American pressings). It was, quite simply, as "there" and real as I've heard recorded sound. And it was not just the aliveness of Stevens' voice, but also the definition of the instruments and the backup singers, clearly rendered as a smog-free day in the Rockies.

Of course, the first two movements of Prokofiev's *Lt. Kije* (suite), by Reiner and the Chicago (on a 45-rpm pressing from Classic Records) was a must. The off-stage trumpet that opens the first movement really came from off the stage, the strings



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## VPI Classic 3 Turntable/Arm (The Neo [=New] Classic)

This is a new version of VPI's best-selling Classic arm/table combo. At \$6000, it is nearly twice as expensive and worth it. Why? Because it is better than the Classic. I have to confess I hadn't taken its full measure until I began the analog listening session with the 3.7s. It was easy to see it is a better-built 'table, e.g. the superiority of its new isolation base that has four far-bigger, heavier feet upon which the 'table's platform rests. There was an evident sturdiness of construction unbeknownst to the original Classic. It is, as I've said before, much more beautiful to behold, looking like a "pro." A stainless-steel mounting plate has been added underneath the pickup arm for, the designer says, "greater mechanical rigidity." There is (maybe as a consequence of this) a reduction in noise. Is this, I asked myself, the reason there is greater purity and definition to the low frequencies, what seems like a new "edge definition" to individual bass notes?

The arm itself has been damped internally with what I assume to be a viscous material and wrapped externally

were layered so that you hear the spaces of air between some of the players, the bass drum was audible and its "attack" clearly rendered, but most striking of all was the expansion of the acoustic envelope surrounding the players and the shell of the stage, nicely differentiated from the different "sound" of the auditorium itself. And, lest we forget, the celesta in the second movement, in its own space, and perfectly suspended behind the left speakers, as its notes were hanging there in the corner of Room 2. Thinking about the added sweep and grandeur of the whole thing, I realize that words are, at this point, inadequate to describe what the ear *knows*.

(In each of these instances, and the ones to come, we had both cleaned the recordings, with the VPI Typhoon, and demagnetized them with the Furutech DeMag.)

A side note perhaps: If the record were not cleaned, you could, through these speakers hear a slight grain, a grit and veiling. A test of this came with the 45-rpm Classic version of Louis Armstrong's "St. James Infirmary" (taken from the old Audio Fidelity *Satchmo Plays King Oliver*). This disc, a single, was cut using the Clarity process (no magnetic particles). The reproduction was so clean you could hear the difference between the uncleaned and cleaned playings. More than this, you could also discern what was later confirmed, that the vinyl itself was not first-rate. (Little signs of wear even on the first playing.) Putting these nits aside, the recording on this system had an almost supernatural realism that made each person who heard it marvel. Satchmo sounded more like Satchmo himself than I have ever heard on disc—the backup musicians simply "there" and even against the very dark acoustic of the recording itself.

with a blue paper that looks like the useful kind I find at the hardware store. Also, like the internal damping, is the long-awaited addition of Nordost wiring to the arm's innards, which I know audibly increases the definition of the cartridge's subtlest signals—in this case, the almost totally neutral Benz Micro LP S-MR.

There are some things missing from older and other VPI designs—a characteristic and pervasive darkness (consonant with the music, though) and susceptibility to externally induced noise. The Neo version also sounds more stable, as if the speed control has been enhanced. The net effect of these changes is there is less detectable turntable between you and the music. The LPs now seem to float on a cushion of air. I confess that with the earlier systems in Room 2, I was unable to hear the most subtle of these refinements—it took the increased resolution afforded by the Maggies to make clear all that the Neo Classic knew how to make clear. It is a work of art, Harry Weisfeld's best. Amen! Five Stars. **HP**

The acid test during these sessions came when the Decca Phase 4 recording of Bernard Herrmann's *The Three Worlds of Gulliver*, a multi-miked spectacular with batteries of percussion instruments, themselves a delight to hear on a good speaker system, suddenly became "alive," nay, make that resolved, illuminated. They had been so complexly and densely coloristically scored that their attacks, their steeper transient envelopes, had always been somewhat submerged. If you are a Herrmann fan (I am), you'll get a three-dimensional rendering of his orchestrating genius.

I realize that it may "sound" as if I have gone over the top in some of these descriptions—and I could continue with notes from other LPs, even a few CDs (and will). But the speakers, as they are currently configured, sound as I am trying to describe them, however inadequate the imagery I've used. I almost wish, given the impossibility of it, you could hear them with me. I believe every serious student of the art and the absolute sound itself owes it to himself to give these speakers an audition, understanding that, if they don't almost knock you out, they are set up wrong or by the incompetent. Period.

*Elsewhere in this issue, we've printed the TAS editors' and writers' lists of the Ten Most Significant Amplifiers of All Time. Because of HP's unique experience and perspective, we've chosen to list his picks for Top Ten Most Significant Amps and his comments on each amp in full here in the Workshop.—Ed.*